



# WINE ENTHUSIAST MAGAZINE

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## The Flavors of Autumn

Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cardamom, clove, cumin—though they're associated with simplicity, home and hearth, these flavors can help create dishes of remarkable sophistication.

### Winter Squash Soup



Percy Watley, executive chef at The Ahwahnee in Yosemite Valley, presides over the landmark hotel's grand dining hall, where hundreds of guests gather for December's Bracebridge Dinner, a four-hour dinner theater extravaganza featuring a seven-course feast. This voluptuous soup is one of this year's seasonal specials and is offered on the hotel's regular menu without the pork belly, a gesture to vegetarian guests. Yet adding the succulent cured pork, Chef Watley promises, makes the dish soar.

For the pork belly:

1/2 cup plus 3 tablespoons sugar

1/2 cup kosher salt

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

4 star anise, broken into small pieces

12 black peppercorns, cracked

6 whole cloves

1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1 pound raw pork belly

1/2 cup soy sauce

Peel of 1 orange, colored part only

2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger

4 cups chicken stock

For the soup:

Olive oil

1 winter squash (about 2 1/2 pounds), such as acorn, butternut, kabocha, sugar pumpkin, blue pumpkin, turban or hubbard, halved and seeded

4 ounces (1 stick, 1/2 cup) butter

1 yellow onion, diced

1 leek, white part only, diced

1 tablespoons grated fresh ginger

Kosher salt

1 large russet potato, peeled and diced

8 cups homemade chicken stock

2 bay leaves

1 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves

1 cup heavy cream

Black pepper in a mill

Small celery leaves, for garnish

To make the pork belly: Start the pork belly a day before making the soup. In a small bowl, combine the 1/2 cup sugar, salt, cinnamon, star anise, peppercorns, cloves and nutmeg. Toss with your fingers or a fork to make a uniform mixture. Set the pork belly in a glass dish and cover it with the mixture, turning it once so that it is nearly buried. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

On soup day, preheat the oven to 300 F. Brush the spice mixture off the pork. Set an oven-proof pot that will hold the belly flat over medium heat. Add the soy sauce, 3 tablespoons of sugar, stock, orange peel and ginger and bring to a boil, stirring until the sugar dissolves.

Add the pork belly, turn to coat it thoroughly and set in the middle rack of the oven. Cover and cook for 4 hours. Remove the pan from the oven. Transfer the pork belly to a plate or dish; use within an hour or so or cool, refrigerate and return to room temperature before serving. Discard the cooking liquid or refrigerate it to use as a sauce with stir fry; skim the fat before using it.

To serve, cut into 12 to 16 1/4-inch thick crosswise slices. Store leftover pork belly wrapped in the refrigerator and use within a few days.

To make the soup: Preheat the oven to 400 F. Lightly brush a sheet pan with olive oil and set the squash, cut side down, on it. Brush the skin of the squash with olive oil and bake until very tender, about 45 minutes, or longer depending on the variety. Remove from the oven and cool. Separate the cooked squash from the skin and discard the skin. Set aside.

Melt the butter in a large saucepan or soup pot set over medium heat; add the onion, leek and ginger, lower the heat and cook slowly until soft, fragrant and translucent, about 20 minutes. Do not let brown. Season with salt.

Add the potato, squash purée, stock, bay leaves and thyme and increase the heat to high. When the stock boils, reduce the heat to low and simmer gently for 30 minutes, until the potato is very tender and the flavors have come together. Cool slightly; use tongs to remove and discard the bay leaves.

Purée the soup with an immersion blender or pass it through a food mill fitted with the smallest blade. Strain through a fine sieve into a clean saucepan. Stir in the cream, set over medium heat and heat through; do not let the soup boil again. Taste, correct for salt and season generously with black pepper.

To serve: Place 2 slices of pork belly in 6 warmed soup plates. Ladle in the soup, garnish and serve. Serves 6 to 8.

**Wine recommendations:**

Keith Hill, food and beverage director at The Ahwahnee, recommends pairing this soup with Thomas Fogarty 2008 Monterey Gewürztraminer, Trefethen 2008 Napa Valley Dry Riesling or Hatcher Winery 2008 Calaveras County Viognier.